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Parents of Isaac Lethbridge fight to keep newborn Couple has lost custody of 7 other kids

April 27, 2007

By JACK KRESNAK
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Wayne County Child Protective Services on Friday filed a petition to terminate the parental rights of Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge after removing their 15-day-old baby boy from their Canton Township home.

The Lethbridges — whose 2-year-old son Isaac was beaten to death in a Detroit foster home last summer — said they will try to regain custody of their newborn even though judges in Washtenaw County have terminated their parental rights to seven of their nine previous children.

The couple appeared at a preliminary hearing in Wayne County juvenile court this afternoon. That hearing is still going on.

The children were removed by CPS, a division of the Wayne County Department of Human Services, about 4 p.m. Thursday with the assistance of Canton Township police, officials said.

The DHS' permanent custody petition also seeks to transfer jurisdiction of the boy, whom the parents named Xavier Isaac Lethbridge, to Washtenaw County DHS where judges already have ended their rights to other children on grounds that they neglected them and that the couple did not benefit from counseling and other programs to improve their parenting skills.

Matt Lethbridge, 33, said the baby's seizure by CPS was improper because Xavier was not at risk of any harm under his parents' care, despite their history.

"This is absolutely ridiculous," Lethbridge said before the court hearing. "There is no danger to him whatsoever because there are so many monitors in place right now."

Lethbridge said he and his wife, 30, did not keep the baby's birth a secret from anyone and would have told DHS about Xavier's birth at home on April 12 if they had asked. He said the couple told their private therapist, Celeste Brown, who saw the child twice in the past two weeks.

Lethbridge said their townhouse in Canton is clean. The couple lost custody of Isaac and his then 3-year-old sister in September 2005 when police found the children in their filthy home in Westland. Both Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge later were convicted of misdemeanor child neglect in that case.

On March 30, Washtenaw County Family Court Judge Darlene O'Brien terminated their parental rights to an 11-month-old daughter, but declined to terminate rights on the now 4-year-old daughter who allegedly was abused in the same foster homes as her brother Isaac.

Last December, Matt Lethbridge initially denied to the court that his wife was pregnant, but quickly recanted and said he was afraid authorities would again take their newborn away.

Washtenaw County officials said they would seek to remove the baby from the Lethbridges and terminate their parental rights. That county's DHS was waiting for a birth, though it was Wayne County officials who removed the child.

"I knew the second they knew he was born they were going to come and take him," Lethbridge said. "We didn't run. We didn't hide. We were right there. We opened the door and were cooperative."

Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 59, of Detroit is scheduled to be tried June 4 on involuntary manslaughter and child abuse charges in Isaac Lethbridge's death last summer in her foster home.

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April 27, 2007

Parents of Isaac Lethbridge may lose 10th child

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- The parents of Isaac Lethbridge, the child who was beaten to death in a Detroit foster home, lost their 10th child to child protective services and face losing their parental rights, following a hearing today in Wayne County juvenile court.

Referee Peter C. Schummer Jr. authorized a petition to terminate Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge's parental rights to Xavier Isaac, according to Chief Circuit Judge Mary Beth Kelly. The infant was born earlier this month.

"Matt and his wife are devastated, obviously," said Robert Killewald, the court-appointed attorney who represented Matt Lethbridge in Washtenaw County, where the couple lost their rights to seven other children. "They are shell shocked."

Two police officers assisted two Michigan child protective workers when they removed the infant from the couple's Canton Township home, Killewald said. Since a filthy home was one of the reasons the Lethbridges lost their children in the past, Matt Lethbridge asked the police to come into the home.

"It was perfect," Killewald said.

Schummer transferred the case to Washtenaw County, where the couple's rights to seven other children have been terminated.

Last month, Washtenaw County Family Court Judge Darlene O'Brien gave a split ruling on two of the Lethbridges' daughters who are in foster care. She terminated the rights to one of their daughters, who is now 1 year-old. But she did not terminate their rights to their 4-year-old daughter.

Instead, she allowed the Lethbridges to have a relationship with their daughter as she is being raised by permanent guardians, presumably the Washtenaw County couple whose home she is in.

The Lethbridges could not be reached for comment.

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Slain boy's parents lose son

They face hearing on newborn's custody

April 28, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When the knock from Child Protective Services came Thursday afternoon, 2-week-old Xavier Isaac Lethbridge had been asleep for 15 minutes, his parents said Friday.

Armed with a court order and backed up by two Canton police officers, child abuse investigators removed Xavier from Matthew and Jennifer Lethbridge's custody -- the 10th of their children to be placed in foster care.

Over the last nine years, the Lethbridges lost rights to seven children because of neglect. They still visit a 4-year-old daughter in foster care; their 2-year-old son Isaac was beaten to death in a foster home last summer in a case that exposed flaws in the system.

When authorities came for Xavier about 4 p.m. Thursday, Jennifer Lethbridge, 30, said she wakened the baby, changed him and breast-fed him for a few minutes before he was taken from her arms. She gave birth at home April 12 with a midwife's help.

At a hearing in Wayne County Juvenile Court on Friday, a referee ordered the case transferred to Washtenaw County, where the Lethbridges formerly lived and where they have been unable to convince judges that they have learned from past mistakes.

The petition filed by the state Department of Human Services in Wayne County asks a judge to terminate the Lethbridges' rights primarily because judges had done so before. A DHS report written Friday notes that the couple's apartment was clean and that they have enough income to provide for a baby.

"This is absolutely ridiculous," Matthew Lethbridge, 33, said. "There is no danger to him whatsoever because there are so many monitors in place right now."

The Lethbridges are suing the Detroit-based foster care agency Lula Belle Stewart Center and Isaac's foster parent, Charlsie Adams-Rogers. Adams-Rogers, 59, of Detroit is to be tried June 4 on involuntary manslaughter and child abuse charges.

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Verdict expected soon in baby's poisoning

Tuesday, April 17, 2007

By Barton Deiters

The Grand Rapids Press

HASTINGS -- She has blamed her best friend. She has blamed her 3-year-old son. But today, a jury is to decide whether 24-year-old Jennifer Clement is to blame for her infant daughter's poisoning when the 8-month-old drank bleach that was put into her baby bottle.

On Monday, Barry County Prosecutor David Banister presented testimony from witnesses including 19-year-old Karla Mellen, Clement's former best friend, who was at the home Sept. 8 when baby Belle Clement ingested the bleach.

Mellen said she was spending the night with Clement, who was frustrated with her 3-year-old son and her husband and had asked her friend to come over and help. Prior to the alleged poisoning, Mellen said Clement said she wished she had never had children, never gotten married and that the two women should just leave their lives behind and go on vacation.

Instead, the two women spent the day watching TV while their 2- and 3-year-old sons played in another room.

A distressing situation

Mellen said Clement then went to the kitchen to prepare baby formula for Belle and gave her the bottle while she sat in her swing-seat. Mellen said the child dropped the bottle several times, but Clement returned it to her.

Mellen said only Clement prepared the bottle, that the 3-year-old was nowhere near it before it was given to the baby, and that within a few moments of the feeding, Belle vomited.

After giving the baby a bath and putting her down for a nap, Clement asked Mellen if she smelled bleach in the bottle.

"As soon as I smelled it, I knew," Mellen said.

Clement then came out with a Clorox Bleach container, saying it was out and open. Immediately, Clement turned to her son, Christopher Clement Jr., and asked him why he tried to kill his sister, according to Mellen.

"He looked confused," Mellen said. "Belle looked like she was asleep, but her eyes were open."

An emergency call

Mellen said she had to convince Clement to call 911 because Clement was afraid she would lose her children.

The baby was taken to the hospital and has since recovered.

In the ensuing investigation, Clement told authorities her son could open child-proof caps, but they gave the boy a prescription bottle and he had no idea how to open it.

Clement also reported the boy was prone to injuring his sister, stabbing her with screwdrivers and pencils and even getting into kitchen knives. She described him several times as "evil."

But Rebecca Warner, foster care worker with the state Department of Human Services, said the boy clearly loved his sister, was kind and protective of her, but was ignored by his mother in lieu of the younger child.

"Christopher Jr. is a very sweet little boy," Warner said.

Soon, Clement began to accuse Mellen of "having something to do" with the poisoning.

While the prosecution dominated the trial Monday, Judge James Fisher said he was ready to throw out the most serious charge of first-degree child abuse today unless Banister could show how the legal standard for that charge was met since Belle suffered no substantial injury from the alleged poisoning.

The jury still could consider second-degree child abuse. That has a maximum sentence of five years in prison, compared to first-degree abuse, which is a 15-year felony.

Makled said it is unlikely his client will take the stand in her defense before closing arguments.

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Wass sentenced

Dog mauling case



Corey Wass, right, stands with his defense attorney Charles Nebel of Munising before Judge William Carmody for sentencing Friday. (Journal photo by John Pepin)

By JOHN PEPIN, Journal Munising Bureau

NEWBERRY — A Luce County father responsible for his 3-year-old daughter being horribly mauled by a Rottweiler in January was sentenced Friday to serve probation and jail time, while being allowed to retain his parental rights.

Corey Wass, 27, pleaded guilty on Jan. 22 to one count of second degree child abuse, a crime punishable by four months to four years incarceration.

On Friday, Judge William Carmody, sentenced Wass in Luce County Circuit Court to serve 18 months probation and pay numerous fines and costs, including \$2,320 restitution.

A one-year jail term was also ordered, five months to be served immediately. The balance would be served if Wass violates his probation. Wass was credited for 107 days served, which means he should be released from jail within a few days.

“Your narcissistic behavior came close to costing your daughter’s life,” Carmody told Wass. “This matter will always be with you and that’s part of the penalty you’re going to suffer.”

Wass, who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, said he had not taken his prescribed medications on Jan. 4 and he had smoked marijuana. He had arranged the day before to take care of his daughter Iris.

After she was dropped off by her maternal grandmother, Iris had laid down to take a nap, while watching a movie with her father. While Corey Wass slept, Iris made her way outside to a yard area where she became entangled in the chain of a female Rottweiler.

Police believe the dog panicked and Iris suffered cuts, abrasions and bites over 95 percent of her body. She spent two weeks in a burn unit in Ann Arbor after being airlifted from Newberry.

Some of the bites sunk to the girl’s bones and dirt had to be vacuumed from her lungs. Since the attack she has awakened screaming with night terrors, her mother said.

On the day of the mauling, Corey Wass did not wake up, despite ambulance and police arriving at the house with sirens wailing. Authorities believe the mauling continued for at least an hour before his daughter was rescued by a neighbor.

"I just feel very badly about what happened," Wass told Carmody, his leg shaking visibly while he spoke. "I'd do anything to take it back."

Defense Attorney Charles Nebel said his client has taken responsibility for what has happened.

"I don't think he's totally ever going to forgive himself for what happened," Nebel said. "To say he's sorry doesn't even come close to how he truly feels."

After his sentencing, Carmody held a hearing on a petition submitted by the Michigan Department of Human Services to terminate Wass' parental rights.

The hearing, which lasted almost five hours, included testimony from Wass, his mother Sandra Wass, fiancé Megan King, Iris's mother Amber Mayor and officials from the Department of Human Services.

Mayor wanted Wass to lose his right to remain one of Iris's parents.

"He was supposed to be prepared for our daughter," Mayor said. "He was using drugs when she was around and she almost died from it...The only way we are completely sure that this won't happen again is if rights are terminated. It would be just awful if she had to see him again."

David Babcock, a children's protective services worker with the DHS in Luce County, said he recommended Wass lose his parental rights, based on the severity of Iris's injuries, Wass's history of use and dependence on marijuana and alcohol and his bipolar disorder.

Wass was on probation for impaired driving when the attack occurred.

"I believe the cards are stacked against Mister Wass," Babcock said.

Before a plan to reunite parents with their children is formulated in DHS cases, when substance abuse is an issue, case workers usually need to see at least one year of sobriety demonstrated, Babcock said.

He said that one-year period would begin once Wass is released from jail. But the position of the DHS was that there was no chance for a reunion between Wass and his daughter.

Wass, whose father died last June a heavy marijuana smoker, said he had been using the drug casually since he was 14. He said his prescription medication makes him tired and he didn't feel well on the day of the attack and didn't take it.

Wass's mother and fiancé testified that Wass was a good parent to his daughter and that he wouldn't be using drugs or alcohol when he returns home, once getting out of jail.

"I love my daughter and despite what everybody is thinking, I wouldn't do anything to harm her," Wass said, referring to using illicit drugs while she was around or not taking his prescription medications. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure something like that never happens again."

Testimony from witnesses, including Mayor, attested to Wass — the father of three children — being an attentive father prior to the mauling incident.

Luce County Prosecutor Peter Tazelaar said Wass had no plans to change his circle of friends by remaining with his girlfriend and living in the home he shared with she and his mother when the attack occurred.

Wass's mother has a conviction for possession of marijuana within the past two years and King admitted she used marijuana and alcohol with Corey Wass in the past. Both said they are no longer using.

Tazelaar also argued that even after Wass received counseling for alcohol use, he used drugs and didn't take his medicines, which contributed to the mauling.

"History predicts the future," Tazelaar said.

Nebel argued that "one horrible act of inattentiveness does not warrant termination" of parental rights.

"It's certainly within her (Iris) best interest to keep this committed and hands-on father in her life," Nebel said.

Carmody agreed when he ruled in Wass's favor, ordering a long-term plan for reunification be developed.

Mayor said she will appeal the ruling.

"I'm not happy. It's going to ruin her (Iris)," Mayor said. "I'm going to fight this until I get what I want. It's not his best interest (we're concerned with), it's supposed to be hers."

Nebel said he believes his client will comply with all court orders and restrictions. No visitation is currently allowed without supervision.

"I'm convinced he gets it and he won't put himself in that position again. It was a close case and I think the judge came up with the right decision," Nebel said. "I hope that the little girl is going to be able to transition without too much trouble."

When Carmody announced his ruling, Wass' mother, like Mayor, sat on a court bench, crying.

"Thank God," she said.

In debate over shaken-baby syndrome, studies disagree on the force required to cause death

ALLEN G. BREED

AP National Writer

When 7-month-old Natalie Beard's body arrived in the autopsy room, there were no outward signs of physical abuse. No broken bones, bruises or abrasions. But behind her pretty brown eyes and beneath her fine dark-brown hair, there was chaos.

Both retinas were puckered and clouded red. And there was acute bleeding outside and beneath the brain's outer membrane — the kind of bleeding most often associated with a burst aneurysm.

To forensic experts, these were classic signs that Natalie was shaken to death.

The common wisdom in such "shaken-baby" cases was that the last person with the child before symptoms appeared was the guilty party, and a Wisconsin jury convicted baby sitter Audrey Edmunds of first-degree reckless homicide.

Edmunds is now 10 years into her 18-year prison sentence, and she's seeking a new trial.

In the decade since her conviction, her attorneys say, many experts have studied the physics and biomechanics of shaken-baby syndrome and have concluded that shaking alone could not have produced Natalie's injuries without leaving other evidence of abuse.

Among those now questioning the diagnosis is Dr. Robert Huntington III, the forensic pathologist who examined Natalie's body and whose testimony helped put Edmunds away.

If the trial were held today, Huntington told The Associated Press recently, "I'd say she died of a head injury, and I don't know when it happened ... There's room for reasonable doubt."

Some judges in other cases have broadly agreed.

Last year, a judge in Manatee County, Fla., barred use of the term "shaken baby syndrome" because of its possible prejudicial influence on jurors.

A Kentucky judge subjected shaken-baby to a "Daubert" test — a kind of mini-trial to determine the validity and admissibility of certain evidence. Circuit Judge Lewis Nicholls decided he could not admit expert testimony on a theory whose foundation may amount to "merely educated guesses" about the cause of death.

"The best the Court can conclude is that the theory of SBS is currently being tested, yet the theory has not reached acceptance in the scientific community," Nicholls ruled.

But the syndrome does not lack official recognition.

"Shaken baby syndrome is a serious and clearly definable form of child abuse," the American Academy of Pediatrics declares on its Web site.

According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, SBS bears a "classic triad" of signs — brain hemorrhaging, retinal hemorrhaging and brain swelling. Because of a baby's relatively heavy head and weak neck muscles, shaking "makes the fragile brain bounce back and forth inside the skull and causes bruising, swelling, and bleeding, which can lead to permanent, severe brain damage or death," the institute says.

An estimated 1,500 shaken-baby cases were reported in the United States last year, says Toni Blake, a San Diego defense attorney who specializes in the cases.

But 3 1/2 decades after the term was first used, there seems to be no middle ground in the debate.

"It doesn't exist," contends Dr. John Plunkett, a Minnesota pathologist who began openly questioning shaken-baby following the 1997 involuntary manslaughter conviction of British nanny Louise Woodward, the case that put SBS on the map. "You can't cause the injuries said to be caused by shaking, by shaking."

Many pediatricians disagree.

"People confess to it. So it has to be possible," counters Dr. Suzanne Starling, director of forensic pediatrics at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters in Norfolk, Va.

She and her colleagues analyzed 81 cases in which an adult confessed to shaking and/or battering a child. In cases where only shaking was admitted, the children were 2.39 times more likely to have retinal hemorrhages than victims of impact alone, they found, "suggesting that shaking is more likely to cause retinal hemorrhages than impact."

Plunkett scoffs: "What is the No. 2 cause of wrongful convictions? False confessions. ... You don't base scientific conclusions on what people confess to."

Boston pediatrician Robert Reece is on the international advisory board of the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome, and yet he avoids using the term in a courtroom. "What goes on in the courtroom is up or down, and medicine doesn't work that way usually," he says.

In testimony, he refers to "abusive head trauma" or "inflicted traumatic brain injury" instead, though he still believes shaking alone can cause it.

Research is split:

- Plunkett, in a 2001 article, concluded an infant could suffer a fatal head injury from even a short fall, and that the injury "may be associated with a lucid interval and bilateral retinal hemorrhage." In other words, symptoms might not immediately follow the injury — which can be an important issue in fixing blame. In addition, there were other, accidental sources for one of the "classic" signs of SBS, he wrote in the American Journal of Forensic Medicine & Pathology.

- In a 2003 study, University of Pennsylvania researchers used special dummies to simulate a 1 1/2-month-old baby being shaken or dropped from various heights. The response to a vigorous shaking was "statistically similar" to that from a 1-foot fall onto concrete or concrete with carpet pad, they found; a fall from 3 feet produced forces nearly 40 times greater.

- But still-to-be published research using a more advanced infant dummy simulated far greater brain damage than with previous dummies, says Dr. Carole Jenny, a Brown University Medical School professor and chair of the AAP's committee on child abuse and neglect.

"They come into court and they say, 'Oh, you can't kill a baby just by shaking it,' and yet they have a dead baby before them," she says. "Did a flying saucer come in from Mars and strike the baby in the head?"

- Other studies cited by SBS opponents have suggested that the hemorrhaging and swelling thought to prove shaking can have myriad causes, from dehydration and infection to oxygen deficiency.

Much of the debate has centered on how quickly symptoms begin after a brain trauma. That question was central to the Wisconsin case.

On Oct. 16, 1995, Edmunds was caring for her two daughters and another child when Cindy Beard dropped off her daughter, Natalie.

Natalie had had an ear infection and had vomited in recent days, but her parents say that appeared to have cleared up. But Edmunds says Natalie was unusually fussy that morning and refused to take a bottle.

Edmunds, who was five months pregnant with her third daughter, says she put Natalie down with a propped bottle and went to tend to the other children. When she went back to retrieve Natalie, the girl was crying and limp, her face slick with regurgitated formula.

At her 1996 trial, Huntington testified it was "highly probable" that Natalie was injured within two hours of being treated. That would mean the fatal injury occurred while Natalie was in Edmunds' care.

What changed his mind was a later case involving a child with injuries similar to Natalie's. That child had a "lucid interval" of more than 15 hours before the onset of symptoms, leading Huntington to acknowledge that Natalie could have been injured long before she was dropped off at Edmunds'.

Edmunds' attorney cited other studies in which there were lucid intervals of 24 hours between injury and death.

George Nichols, a former Kentucky medical examiner, testified recently on Edmunds' new trial request. It was his conclusion that Natalie had some kind of choking event, and that a lack of oxygen to the brain resulted in fatal brain injury.

Prosecutors dismissed Plunkett, Nichols and others as "a fringe group of doctors."

Dr. Thomas Bohan, a forensic physicist and attorney, has tried to get the National Academy of Sciences and the National Institute of Justice to evaluate the medical and legal arguments.

In May, he and other specialists who are members of the self-styled Evidence-Based Medicine Group are meeting in Chicago to present papers on shaken-baby syndrome. Bohan, who is also vice president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, says it's not good enough to say you can't really study shaken-baby because you can't shake actual babies to test the hypothesis.

"The point is you don't send people off to prison for 50 years and break up families because you don't want to do the work to validate it," Bohan says.

Audrey Edmunds was hoping that science would set her free.

About once a month, the 45-year-old mother and her daughters visit in the prison cafeteria. They talk on the phone several times a week.

"I've lost a part of their life," says Edmunds, whose husband divorced her several years ago because he couldn't wait any longer. "But there's a lot that we stay strong with, too."

In late March, a judge ruled on Edmunds' motion for a new trial. Her witnesses and newly discovered medical evidence, while strong, did not outweigh trial evidence, he ruled.

Motion denied.

Her attorney has filed a notice of appeal. In the meantime, Edmunds has a parole hearing in October.

The board has already turned her down three times.

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Article published Apr 27, 2007
Benefit sheds light on child abuse
Nick Schirripa
The Enquirer

When Calhoun County Youth Council members looked at statewide child abuse and neglect rates, they were shocked to learn Calhoun County's figures are among the highest, said founder and Calhoun County Board Chairwoman Kate Segal.

So to raise awareness, a group of local high school students have organized for Sunday a family-friendly fundraiser, the "Blue Light Benefit: Shining Awareness on Child Abuse and Neglect in Calhoun County."

"Because child abuse and neglect issues are often hidden in broad daylight, the youth council has worked to shed light on realities that touch too many of our neighbors," said Segal, D-Battle Creek.

The Calhoun County Youth Council is composed of eight students from five area high schools: Robert McFletcher from Battle Creek Central; Ryan Bean from Harper Creek; Andrew Jung and Takuto Sato from Lakeview; Sarah Willits from Marshall; and James Huebschman, Georgette Newman and Madeline Smith from St. Philip Catholic Central.

"Each of us may not be affected personally by abuse or neglect, but it became clear that many children in the county are hurting," said council Vice President Georgette Newman. "We decided that we had to act on the issue during April, National Child Abuse Prevention Month, and make a difference in the lives of the victims."

For more on this story, check out Saturday's Battle Creek Enquirer and online at battlecreekenquirer.com.

Published April 29, 2007

From Eaton Rapids Community News

Auction to help fight child abuse

The Children's Trust Fund, a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect, is hosting its fifth annual "Cherish the Children - The Ultimate Fantasy Auction" Tuesday, May 1, at the Breslin Center, Michigan State University. Doors open and silent auctions begin at 5 p.m. followed by a brief program and live auction at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$100 (of which \$85 is tax-deductible). Auction highlights range from a NASCAR Father's Day package with pit passes to a European castle trip to England, Ireland, or Scotland. Bid on an opportunity to see a live taping of the "Oprah Winfrey Show" in Chicago or two premium tickets to see Supernanny Jo Frost live at the Fox Theatre in May. Proceeds raised will benefit the Children's Trust Fund to bring an end to child abuse. For additional information and/or to order tickets call 1-800-CHILDREN or visit www.michigan.gov/ctf.

Michigan Report

April 27, 2007

D.H.S. NEARING RECOMMENDATIONS ON FOSTER CARE DISPARITIES

Last year the Department of Human Services received some broad recommendations on resolving the disparities between minorities and whites in the foster care system. Later this year it hopes to have some more specific recommendations on policy changes and training to begin changing the numbers, Director Marianne Udow told Gongwer News Service this week.

Ms. Udow said preliminary recommendations from an in-depth study of the foster care system in Saginaw County are expected June 12. And the study group will begin shortly thereafter looking at Wayne County.

The department, with funding from the Skillman and Annie E. Casey foundations, has developed a team of national foster care experts, as well as some internal officials, to scour current law and practices for contributors to the gap.

The survey is not only looking at the written materials, but involves talking to the caseworkers, birth families, foster families, children and court officials.

"It's really quite exciting work," Ms. Udow said of the efforts to eliminate the foster care disparities. And she said the outcomes could bring additional attention to the state.

"Their work extends, and some of their recommendations will extend, beyond our own casework," she said. "It's work that's getting attention across the country."

But she said it has also had to be sensitive work. "It's difficult conceptually; it's difficult emotionally. Sometimes people become defensive in work like this," she said. Essentially, the data shows foster care workers, whether intentionally or not, are being racist in deciding what children should be removed from their families and placed in licensed foster care.

A large part of the recommendations for solving the racial disparities in the system are expected to pertain to missing or insufficient resources, Ms. Udow said. Under current policy, families brought into the foster system are supposed to receive individual plans designed to bring the families back together, where possible, as quickly as possible. "That doesn't always happen because not all communities have the resources to meet those individual needs," she said. "That's a community partnership issue."

But additional resources do not necessarily mean additional money. "There's a whole range of things that can happen," she said. "Non-profit agencies operating in those communities may not know there's a gap. We can establish better priorities for the resources we already have."

And some of those resources may be found within the social structure of the family she said. In different families, particularly African American families, the definition of family is expanded compared to Caucasian families," she said.

For instance, the idea of “fictive kin”, neighbors or family friends who are truly seen as part of the family by children, are more prevalent in black families than in white families. Ms. Udow said those fictive kin are often overlooked as a placement option because caseworkers are not aware of the option or, because they are not related, caseworkers expect that they will have to be licensed as a foster family.

“Some of our staff are not clear about the roll that fictive kin or how important they are or that they might serve as a placement opportunity,” she said. “They’re making distinctions (between related and not related) where they maybe don’t need to.”

And she said that may only require changes in training, not in rule or statute, to implement.

The department has already undertaken a number of efforts to resolve the racial disparities based on a report released last year (See [Gongwer Michigan Report, March 21, 2007](#)). Primary so far has been working to collect the maximum possible in federal foster care funds and obtaining a waiver to allow some additional options in using those funds. And the Family to Family program, which is now in operation in all 83 counties, provides more family and community input into placement decisions, Ms. Udow said.

The goal of the most recent study is to bring practices to match recommendations that the department build community support for reducing the disparities and ensure culturally proficient practices.

Saginaw County was the pilot for the studies, and Wayne County was next as the largest county, and majority of the foster care caseload, in the state. DHS spokesperson Maureen Sorbet said the study team is hoping to look at a rural county next, but is still trying to find the money to cover that study.

But Ms. Udow said the findings in Saginaw, in large part, would be applicable to the rest of the state.

State revokes Roberts' foster care license

By James Martinez, Gaylord Herald Times Staff Writer
Posted Saturday, April 28, 2007 12:16 AM EDT

HAYES TOWNSHIP — State officials say an adult foster care home owner's license was revoked earlier this month after her license was suspended in December and she recently withdrew her appeal of the suspension.

Roberts Gentle Care Adult Foster Care Home, owned by Phyllis Roberts, has not been able to house adults since the Michigan Dept. of Human Service (DHS) suspended and issued a notice of intent to revoke the license effective Dec. 9, 2006 at 9 a.m.

According to a DHS press release at that time, a complaint investigation on Dec. 6 revealed several violations of the Adult Foster Care Facility Licensing Act and home rules regarding licensee suitability, restricting the movement of a resident by tying or binding, resident nutrition and rules regarding the altering, administration and storage of resident medication.

"The license was revoked on April 5. It's not likely they will be re-licensed in the next five years," said DHS spokesperson Maureen Sorbet, referencing statutes under the Adult Foster Care Facility Licensing Act of 1979.

According to that act, once the DHS has revoked, suspended or refused to renew a license for an adult foster care facility, the department may refuse to issue or renew of license to that person for five years after that action.

While Roberts can reapply for a license now or in the future, Sorbet said the likelihood of her license being re-approved is unlikely.

Earlier this month, Roberts' attorney Elliot Blumberg acknowledged the appeal had been withdrawn, but said negotiations with the state were ongoing in an attempt to resolve the case in a fashion that would allow her to operate.

Blumberg did not return several phone calls the week of April 23 for further comment to see if negotiations were still ongoing.

When asked, Sorbet said she was not aware of any negotiations going on

between the two parties.

Roberts had been licensed since Oct. 27, 1999. The home was licensed for a capacity of six people.

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The Daily Telegram

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MONDAY APRIL 30, 2007 Last modified: *Friday, April 27, 2007 4:22 PM EDT*

Teens face charges for break-ins

The four 14-year-olds are being held at the Maurice Spear Campus for a series of burglaries.

By [David Frownfelder](#)

Daily Telegram Staff Writer

CAMBRIDGE TWP. — Four 14-year-old Cambridge Township boys are lodged at the Maurice Spear Campus in Adrian, facing six charges each for a series of break-ins between April 19 and 21. Cambridge Police Chief Larry Wibbeler said the spree started on the evening of the 19th, when the four broke into a house on Hand Highway.

“We recovered about 95 percent of the loot they stole. They took some firearms and ammunition and some jewelry,” Wibbeler said. “They also did some shooting in the house and shot out some windows.”

The owner of the house was away at the time, the chief said. The value of the stolen items was estimated at several thousand dollars, with about \$4,000 in damage estimated from the shooting.

The four broke into the house the next night and also broke into another nearby house on Sheeler Road. The crime spree included break-ins and thefts of items from motor homes and other stored vehicles, Wibbeler said.

“We tracked them all day Saturday and got three of them,” he said. “We got the fourth one on Monday.”

Wibbeler said the owner of the house on Sheeler was in the hospital and her sister had come to check on the home. She surprised one of the alleged burglars who ran past her, touching off the search. From this house, the four made off with miscellaneous jewelry, a pistol and money.

All four are facing an appearance in juvenile court in the next two weeks. Each youth faces charges of breaking and entering an occupied dwelling, larceny in a building, larceny of a firearm, malicious destruction of personal property, receiving and concealing stolen property and reckless use of a firearm.

-- CLOSE WINDOW--



ourMidland.com
from the Midland Daily News

04/27/2007

Did system fail Turner?

By [Kelly Dame](#)

Many questions remain after a shooting outside H.H. Dow High School in March, even for the officials who dealt with the troubled young man who pulled the trigger.

Benjamin David Turner, 17, shot his ex-girlfriend four times on a sidewalk outside the school on March 7, before taking his own life. Jessica Forsyth, 17, survived the incident.

Midland County Probate Judge Dorene S. Allen and Circuit Court Judge Paul J. Clulo have answered one question: Should they, could they have done anything differently than they did?

Their verdict: No.

"We've done our self-audit," Clulo said. "We would not have done anything differently."

A long road

Turner's involvement in the courts began as far back as sixth grade in Traverse City, Allen said, though his probate file in Midland County was not opened until March 2004, when he was 14. The charge that stuck was domestic assault with his mother as the victim.

His court file shows a roller coaster ride of behavior, including threats made at school to shoot other students, suspensions from school for fighting and using vulgar language, suicide threats and outbursts at home resulting in holes in walls. The actions landed Turner in the Midland County Juvenile Care Center and in the Day Treatment program multiple times, as well as on intensive probation and a tether. It also resulted in two hospitalizations.

His file includes copies of court exhibits, such as a drawing made by Turner depicting a handgun firing and the bullet impacting a target.

Turner was placed in the Turning Point Youth Center in St. Johns in February 2005, just weeks before the dispositional hearing – equivalent to a sentencing in adult court. At that hearing, Allen told Turner of her thoughts about him, his actions and community safety.

"I am very concerned that I have a young man who is totally out of control and defiant of authority to a degree that I find very disturbing," she said in the transcript.

By September 2005, notes in his court file state Turner made behavioral and academic progress at Turning Point. He remained there until January 2006, when he was released after reports to the court that he had succeeded in programs there.

He was monitored by intensive probation, a function of the probate court, until felony charges were filed against him, as an adult, in the circuit court in June 2006, ending his involvement with the probate system. He was 17 years old.

Those charges were filed after Turner was accused of stealing a .44 Magnum revolver and an SKS assault rifle from a gun cabinet in his mother's Coleman home. Turner made a plea to the offense, and in December was sentenced by Clulo to six months in jail, which was suspended as long as he remained in school; 18 months probation; to attend community treatment programs and to not possess weapons, among other conditions. Clulo chose to veer away from suggestions that it would be appropriate to sentence Turner to jail for 34 days with credit for time served from the prosecuting and defense attorneys on the case.

He also told Turner he saw the case – with weapons involved – as a red flag.

After his sentencing on the adult charge, Turner did well. He attended a local alternative high school and met the requirements that were set out for him, Clulo said, adding he was rewarded for his progress by being named student of the month.

The goal: Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is the goal of the court system in dealing with youth, both judges said.

"What was done was extensive," Allen said of the actions taken with Turner. She pointed out \$93,000 in county money was spent to help the boy. The pile of paperwork in her copy of his probate court file runs about 6 inches high.

Both judges said the adult court has fewer resources by nature to help youths, though there are things that can be done. For Clulo, one way to help was by holding school out to Turner as a carrot to help him avoid jail as well as spur him to do something positive for himself.

"I wanted him to have a diploma or G.E.D.," Clulo said. "Without that, these kids don't have a chance."

Clulo and Allen said while they used everything the court system had available to help the boy, there is more that could have been done if there were a sort of safety net to tie community resources together.

Allen explained there is a lost year – between age 17, at which point the law considers a person an adult, and 18, when a person has reached adult status in the mental health system. She and others involved in Midland Kids First have been working to fill that gap for several years now in the areas of juvenile sex offender treatment, early childhood intervention, whole family intervention, and alcohol and substance abuse treatment.

"We have more than one child in this community with David's symptoms and problems," Allen said.

To help them, the court is participating in a pilot program using what are known as SED (severely emotionally disturbed) waivers. Allen said the waivers better tie together court and mental health services.

"It's a supernanny kind of concept," she said.

Did the system fail?

David Turner's family members have stated their belief that the system failed the boy.

"We believe that in his own way David was crying out for help," read a statement released to the media just after the shooting. "And we believe that on March 7, David left one victim in the high school parking lot, and the system left another."

Marie Turner, David's mother, explained she believes the courts should have looked more into his record, including medical diagnoses of oppositional defiance disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and bipolar disorder, to craft special treatment by the juvenile and adult

courts as well as probation officers.

She said he needed more than just 18 months probation, but at the same time pointed out that locking kids up does nothing to help them with their problems. She also believes her son's case was on the courts' calendars long enough that it was pushed through to get it closed.

"He needed rules," Marie said, adding she felt the probation officer who dealt with her son's adult court file didn't follow through with information she reported about her son. That included various calls about David stealing her prescription medications and acting out.

The difference between the services offered by the probate court probation officer and the adult probation officer included the former being aware of David's absences from school, and the latter not knowing. "And David knew that," she said.

She admitted other things could have been done to prevent the shooting, such as her son not having access to the gun he used.

"It was in a safe and I regret not moving them all," she said of the gun used in the shooting and other guns in the home. "I regret it more than anything in the world."

The judges acknowledge her point of view.

"We understand what the mother would say here about the system failing him," Clulo said.

Both he and Allen pointed out Marie appeared in court with her son for every hearing date.

"When we're dealing with children, we're dealing with a family," Clulo said, adding the successfulness of treating a child hinges on how the family deals with the child's problems.

Allen knows the court and school system have many fingers pointed at them to solve problems with kids. "But at a point, it's up to the family and the individual," she said.

We want to know what you think! Please feel free to use the "post a comment" link below. Note that the terms and conditions require both first and last name.

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Niles Daily Star

ONLINE EDITION

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Help providers target homeless

By KATHIE HEMPEL / Niles Daily Star
Friday, April 27, 2007 11:23 AM EDT

NILES - Representatives of groups that provide helpful services gathered in one place in Niles Thursday in an attempt to help the homeless.

More than 30 people came to Homeless Connect at 104 N. Third St. to find out how to access services.

Help in some cases was instantaneous.

Berrien County Sheriff's Department, along with 17 Berrien County social service agencies, got the word out and brought those who needed help finding such basics as food and clothing.

Help was available for shelter, children services and those for whom domestic violence was an issue.

"Too many people still think that homelessness is simply an issue involving those who are addicted or too lazy to work. The average age of the homeless has been reported as low as 9 years old. Kids who are moved from shelter to shelter rarely graduate. Many families today are just one lost paycheck away from homelessness," Alysia Babcock, chair of the Housing Resource Network said.

This is the second Berrien County Homeless Connect Day the group has facilitated. The first was held in Benton Harbor and the group hopes to hold events every three months alternating between the Niles and north county location until the services can be offered daily.

"The answer to homelessness is permanent supportive housing. Use of shelters, jails emergency hospital services by the homeless cost \$40,000 per year per individual. In this area we can provide permanent supportive housing for \$7,000 per year. The Housing First model, after which is program planning is designed has been proven in San Francisco, New York and Seattle," Babcock said.

She said it has also been proven that once people have shelter they can then concentrate on handling their addiction or mental health problems. Drinking and substance were shown to decrease once a homeless person had a roof over their head according to Babcock.

"Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration. That is what we have here and what we need more of," Carie Sutton, Housing Resource Network co-chair said.

"The Sheriff's department went out and found people who needed us at the library and dollar stores. They brought them here today. It is so neat to see all the agencies working together. We especially want to encourage the faith-based communities to become involved with this effort," Babcock said. This easy access to community services is something the group hopes to mobilize and have a set schedule people can rely on eventually. Until then they hope the quarterly events will become monthly until the services can be made easily accessible everyday.

"Many homeless people don't have transportation or phones to be able to even find if the services they need exist. To have a one-stop shop as it were, just makes sense," Babcock said. She excitedly told of the day's biggest success. A woman whose husband is on disability, who has three children came in obviously distressed. They are about to be evicted from their home in a nearby community.

"Before she left we had given her food for the family, blankets and clothes. We had hooked her up with someone who could help her get the birth certificates for her kids and identification she needed but didn't have the \$47 to obtain. She had a cut that needed stitches but no money to have it tended to. That too was resolved before she left with an entirely different sense of hope," Babcock said.

Homeless Connect is a national project. The Housing Resource Network received \$1,000 from the Michigan Coalition Against

Homelessness to get the Berrien County effort off the ground.

Participating agencies included: Berrien County Department of Human Services, Berrien County Intermediate School District/McKinney Vento Project for homeless youth, CARES, Christian Services of Niles, Community Connections, Emergency Shelter, Ferry Street Resource Center, Gateway Supportive Employment, Michigan Works, Transitional Housing, Residential Services of Southwestern Michigan, Riverwood Center, Safe Shelter, Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency, Tri-County Head Start, Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan and Neighbor to Neighbor.

"It's about kids. Head Start knows that. The Intermediate School District knows that. The parents trying to feed and clothe their kids know that," Babcock said.

One more family is better off today because of Project Homeless Connect. Babcock and Deputy Adam Hicks with the Sheriff's Department, said that helping one person makes it all worthwhile.



State still limping on dealing with uninsured

Monday, April 30, 2007

By Sharon Emery

Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- "Cover the Uninsured Week" ends today, with nary a word from the federal government on Gov. Jennifer Granholm's plan to cover more than a half-million Michigan residents without health insurance.

They've been waiting more than a year for federal approval, but state officials insist the Michigan First Health Care Plan -- which would redirect how federal Medicaid funds are spent here -- will be initiated yet this spring.

The plan calls for more federal funding, which is the sticking point with the cash-strapped Bush administration.

Negotiations with the federal government are down to "the critical stage," said T.J. Bucholz, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Community Health.

"We're talking about who pays what share (of the program), how many will be covered and what kind of benefits will they have," he said.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt wasn't making any funding promises when he was here in January, although he did praise the governor's plan. And President Bush has said he wants to provide financial assistance to governors looking to cover the uninsured.

Granholm's \$1 billion Michigan First Health Care Plan would provide insurance subsidies for some 550,000 uninsured adults making less than 200 percent of poverty, or about \$19,600 for an individual and \$40,000 for a family of four.

The idea is to make sure people get primary and preventive care so that health problems can be identified and addressed early, when they are less expensive to treat. The plan would also keep people without insurance from using expensive hospital emergency rooms for non-life-threatening conditions. And it would help curb Medicaid rolls.

Michigan First addresses the decline in employer-based health insurance, which covered 75 percent of Michigan residents in 1995 but only 60 percent now, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Meanwhile, the state's Medicaid caseload is up from about 1.1 million in 1999 to 1.6 million this year.

There are about 1.1 million people in Michigan without health insurance of any kind.

In other efforts, the nonpartisan, nonprofit Michigan Health Insurance Access Advisory Council is looking beyond government to find a broad, long-term solution to the uninsured. The diverse group includes consumers, payers, providers and purchasers of health care and is chaired by Rob Fowler, executive director of the Small Business Association of Michigan.

"One thing we do agree on is that the cost of the uninsured finds its way back to all of us as paying customers," Fowler said in a statement Thursday during uninsured week events in Detroit. The week of activities across the country is a project of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is designed to call attention to the need to insure all Americans.

Granholm's plan may be part of the solution, he says, but much more needs to be done. The governor's plan deals with only half of Michigan's uninsured.

"MHIAC is taking a long view on the issue of the uninsured and is not tied to a particular administration or

legislature," Fowler said.

Robert Stampfly, a health policy adviser at Michigan State University's Institute for Health Care Studies, said at a conference in February that potential pitfalls for the governor's plan include higher than expected costs if few people enroll or only sick people enroll.

"There are some problem areas and the state is going to have to be really careful," Stampfly said.

Michigan's share of funding the program -- at least \$400 million -- would come from money the state already spends on health care for the uninsured. Granholm administration officials say that would then leverage about \$530 million in federal funding.

Under the proposal, private-sector insurance plans would be offered through an "Exchange" administered by the state. People purchasing insurance through the plan would pay premiums based on their income:

- Those earning less than 100 percent of poverty, about \$9,800 for one person or \$20,000 for a family of four, would have copays but would not pay monthly premiums.
- Those between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty would pay both premiums and copays on a sliding scale based on income, but out-of-pocket costs would not exceed 5 percent of their annual income. At the highest income levels, that would be about \$82 monthly for an individual and \$167 monthly for a family of four.
- The Exchange would offer managed care insurance packages that would include preventive and primary care, hospital care, emergency room care, mental health services and prescription drugs.

Administration officials stress that the plan is a market-based approach, not a big government program. And they say it would strengthen and complement traditional employer-sponsored insurance, not replace it.

Small businesses would be able to purchase nonsubsidized insurance products from the Exchange, allowing them to offer insurance to workers earning above 200 percent of poverty. The Exchange also would bear some of the administrative costs involved with offering health insurance.

The plan is expected to lower costs for business because treating the uninsured is now covered by charging higher premiums for people who do have insurance, and those higher premiums are usually paid at least in part by business. With fewer uninsured people, those costs should drop.

The research group Families USA estimated that in 2005, charity care for the uninsured added an average of \$922 to family health insurance policies and \$341 to individual policies nationally.

Contact Sharon Emery at (517) 487-8888 x236 or e-mail her at semery@boothnewspapers.com.

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Article published Apr 29, 2007

OUR OPINIONS

MiChild program can help more uninsured families

Today marks the final day of Cover the Uninsured Week, a nationwide effort to raise awareness about the estimated 45 million Americans who have no health care coverage.

Because they have limited or no access to primary or preventive health care, the uninsured too often receive no medical attention until their conditions are acute. This frequently results in expensive emergency care that all of us pay for in the form of higher taxes and insurance costs.

It is an inefficient and costly system that contributes to poor health and puts a huge strain on hospitals and other medical facilities. The problem is the focus of much political debate and numerous attempts are under way to change the system.

In the meantime, however, there is one vastly underused resource to help Michigan's children get the health care they need. It's the MiChild program, which provides low-cost insurance for children in families that don't qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private insurance. Families who earn between 150 percent and 200 percent of the federal poverty level - that translates to an annual income of \$30,000-\$37,000 for a family of four - can obtain MiChild coverage for a monthly premium of only about \$10 or so. MiChild covers all health care costs, including vision and dental care.

Unfortunately, of Michigan's estimated 160,000 uninsured children, only 32,782 were enrolled in MiChild as of 2006. In fact, because so few children were covered by MiChild from 2000-03, the state lost \$323 million in federal funds, according to the Detroit News. So in 2003, Michigan got approval to use the funding to provide care for impoverished adults. In 2006, more than 65,000 adults - with incomes lower than \$3,049 a year - received coverage through MiChild funds. That is more than twice the number of children served under the program.

Clearly there are thousands of children in this state who could benefit from MiChild coverage but don't. It is incumbent upon their parents or guardians to enroll them in the program and get the medical care they need to be healthy.

If you or someone you know might benefit from MiChild, you can call toll-free 888-988-6300 for more information or to get an application. Other information on gaining access to health care services for the uninsured also is available by calling the Calhoun Health Plan at 969-6494.

These resources are available to help those who need them. Let's make sure they are fully utilized.

Michigan Report

April 27, 2007

REPORT: MORE CHILDREN IN STATE HAVE HEALTH INSURANCE THAN NATIONALLY

A larger average number of children have health insurance in Michigan than nationally, but slightly more average children are covered by Medicaid in Michigan than nationally, according to a recently released report by the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured.

The report, which looked at fiscal year 2004-2005, shows that nationally 11.6 percent of children don't have any kind of health insurance while only 5.9 percent of children don't have insurance in the state.

According to the report 63.4 percent of the children in the state had health insurance through an employer while that number was 56.4 percent nationally. Nationally, 26.1 percent of children had health insurance through Medicaid while that number was 26.7 percent in the state.

In Michigan .5 percent of children had insurance from another public outlet and 3.5 percent had individual insurance.

Of the children who receive Medicaid in the state, 65 percent of them are 100 percent below the federal poverty level, while nationally that number was 59 percent.

Other Medicaid statistics in the report show that out of the more than 1.5 million people in the state enrolled in Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program in fiscal year 2003, 56.3 percent of them were children. Nationally, out of all persons on Medicaid or SCHIP 49.6 percent of the recipients were children.

The report also shows that 14 percent of what the state spends on Medicaid and the SCHIP went toward children while the national number was 17.2 percent.

In other health related areas, according to the report, the state's infant mortality rate was 8.1 percent while the national level was 7 percent. The state's percentage of babies with low birth weight was only slightly higher at 8.3 percent than the national 8.1 percent.

Michigan Report

April 27, 2007

PROVIDER MEDICAID CUT WILL BE 6 PERCENT

Michigan's Medicaid providers could learn next week that their state reimbursements are being cut by 6 percent beginning June 1 and through at least the rest of the fiscal year, officials said.

Governor Jennifer Granholm said on Thursday that all providers – physicians, hospitals, health maintenance organizations – would see a cut in their Medicaid reimbursements. She made the comment at the same time as she said the state's schools would get a proration letter notifying them that per pupil foundation cuts of \$125, and it was that comment that got the bulk of attention.

On Friday a state official, who did not want to be identified, said the cut in Medicaid provider payments would be 6 percent. The official said details on the cut were still being drafted, so how much it might save totally was unknown.

But officials at two health care associations said that at 6 percent the state would save at least \$49 million in general funds.

No cuts are expected in benefits available to recipients, however, officials said.

The state is expected to issue a letter on Monday or Tuesday notifying all providers that their reimbursements would be cut by 6 percent beginning June 1. Providers and others will be able to make comments on the proposal, but none of those interviewed said they thought comments would change the state's mind.

The cut may drive many physicians, who already complain that the Medicaid reimbursements cover less than half their actual costs, to stop seeing Medicaid patients, said Dennis Paradis, executive director of the Michigan Osteopathic Association.

Hospitals cannot refuse to see Medicaid recipients, but David Seaman of the Michigan Health and Hospital Association, said several hospitals have warned that they may have to drop some services because of the cut.

Those would be cuts of services to an entire community, not just to Medicaid recipients, Mr. Seaman said. His group has estimated that a 6 percent cut will mean a loss of at least \$28 million to hospitals.

The association officials said the cuts just emphasize the need for state leaders to resolve the 2006-07 budget deficit.



More states expand children's health insurance rolls

4/28/2007, 2:41 p.m. ET

By **KEVIN FREKING**
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many states are making more children eligible for government-funded health insurance even as President Bush's health chief says families are relying too much on public money for the coverage.

The goal of the states is to allow more middle-class families to participate in the State Children's Health Insurance Program. The states are raising income limits so families once shut out because of their earnings now can qualify.

When the program began a decade ago, states could offer coverage to families whose income was not more than double the federal poverty level. Today, for example, that threshold is \$41,300 for a family of four. A few states use a Medicaid-based formula that lets them insure more children than under the income limit.

Already, 18 states exceed the 200 percent level, with federal permission. Five more, plus the District of Columbia, could join the list this year, according to a survey by Georgetown University's Center for Children and Families.

New York lawmakers recent set an income limit of up to \$82,600 for a family of four. Eligible families get some government help in buying insurance. The poorer they are, the greater the subsidy.

Other states considering significant expansions in eligibility include California, Ohio and Oklahoma. Florida and Oregon are considering modest expansions, the center reported.

Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt said if other states followed New York's proposal, it would mean that 71 percent of the nation's children would be on "public assistance."

"SCHIP is being proposed in the spirit of the expansion of health coverage. But that isn't the reality," Leavitt said last week. "For every 10 people that go on a publicly funded plan, six of them leave a private plan."

Jocelyn Guyer, deputy executive director of the university center, said states have determined that public health insurance is better than no insurance at all. She said a range of studies shows that most children entering the program would otherwise lack coverage.

"State leaders are moving in a very different direction than the Bush administration is talking about," Guyer said. "They see that even moderate-income families increasingly find that coverage is simply unaffordable, and that it's appropriate to have some subsidy."

Guyer's organization conducts research but also advocates for more federal money for children's health insurance.

In 1997, Congress provided the children's insurance program with \$40 billion over 10 years. The program now covers more than 6 million people, including about 640,000 adults. The families make too much to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to afford private insurance.

Congress probably will renew the program this year, with a contentious debate expected over how much money to spend.

A large expansion of children's health insurance is a priority for Democrats. They want to spend \$75 billion over five years; the Bush administration is seeking less than half that.

States match federal dollars with their one. On average, states spend \$30 for every \$70 from Washington.

The administration wants the insurance program to help just low-income families. Leavitt said all states should enact plans that would provide other families with access to more basic insurance policies.

Those policies may not be as comprehensive as some families would like. For example, he said, they may not cover treatments once the care reaches a certain expense, but the policies would provide some protection.

Leavitt noted that Michigan was working on a plan that would pay as much as \$35,000 in a year for health costs and could serve as many as 1.1 million people. Tennessee is developing what Leavitt described as a "very basic" insurance plan. The plan would cost \$150 a month — \$50 from the insured, \$50 from the employer and \$50 from the state.

Guyer said many states considering expansions will scrap them unless Congress acts this summer to provide more money.

She cited Ohio and Oklahoma. According to the center, both states are considering proposals that would increase eligibility limits so families of four with an income under \$61,950 could participate.

"It just comes down to the reality that in the absence of federal money, they really can't do this," Guyer said.

The Senate Finance Committee may take up a children's health insurance bill as soon as next month.

Legislation introduced last week by Sens. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, would allow states to expand coverage to families earning less than triple the poverty level, or \$61,950 for a family of four.

Kennedy said the program "has been a great success, but 9 million children in the United States still lack health insurance. This bill will make a real difference in their lives."

On the Net:

Georgetown University's Center for Children and Families: <http://ccf.georgetown.edu>

State Children's Health Insurance Program: <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/schip.asp>

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April 30, 2007

Expensive Lesson for Maine as Health Plan Stalls

By [PAM BELLUCK](#)

PORTLAND, Me., April 23 — When [Maine](#) became the first state in years to enact a law intended to provide universal health care, one of its goals was to cover the estimated 130,000 residents who had no insurance by 2009, starting with 31,000 of them by the end of 2005, the program's first year.

So far, it has not come close to that goal. Only 18,800 people have signed up for the state's coverage and many of them already had insurance.

"I think when we first started, in terms of making estimates, we really were kind of groping in the dark," said Gov. John E. Baldacci, who this month proposed a host of adjustments.

The story of Maine's health program — which tries to control hospital costs, improve the quality of health care and offer subsidized insurance to low-income people — harbors lessons for the country, as covering the uninsured takes center stage. States, including California, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, have unveiled programs of their own, seeking to balance the needs and interests of individuals, employers, insurers and health care providers.

But as Maine tries to reform its reforms, it faces some particular challenges: It has large rural, poor and elderly populations with significant health needs. It has many mom-and-pop businesses and part-time or seasonal workers, and few employers large enough to voluntarily offer employees insurance. And most insurers here no longer find it profitable to sell individual coverage, leaving one carrier, Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, with a majority of the market, a landscape that some economists said could make it harder to provide broad choices and competitive prices.

Some parts of the state's current program — named Dirigo after the state motto, which means "I lead" in Latin — are seen as promising. These include the creation of a state watchdog group to promote better health care, and an effort to control costs by asking hospitals to rein in price increases and spending, although experts and advocates said those cuts needed to be greater.

But a financing formula dependent on sizable payments from private insurers has angered businesses and is being challenged in court.

And while some people have benefited from the subsidized insurance, which provides unusually comprehensive coverage, others have found it too expensive. And premiums have increased, not become more affordable, because some of those who signed up needed significant medical care, and there are not enough enrollees, especially healthy people unlikely to use many benefits.

"It was broad-based reform that just never got off the ground," said Laura Tobler, a health policy analyst with the National Conference of State Legislatures. "The way that they funded the program became controversial. And getting insurance was voluntary and it wasn't that cheap."

Governor Baldacci said in an interview that when the Legislature enacted the Dirigo Health Reform Act in 2003, it gave him less money and more compromises than he had wanted. He said his administration had now learned more about what works and what does not.

His new proposals include requiring people to have insurance and employers to offer it and penalizing them financially if they do not; making the subsidized insurance plan, DirigoChoice, more affordable for small businesses; creating a separate insurance pool for high-risk patients; instituting more Medicaid cost controls; and having the state administer DirigoChoice, which is now sold by Anthem Blue Cross.

“We’ve got a reform package that takes Dirigo to the next level,” Mr. Baldacci said. “It takes the training wheels off.”

The proposed overhaul seems to include something each of Maine’s constituencies can embrace and something each opposes, so there is no guarantee which changes will be adopted by the Legislature.

“It’s very hard politically to deal with the underlying costs of the system,” said Andrew Coburn, director of the Institute for Health Policy at the Muskie School of Public Service in Portland. “And Maine is just not wealthy enough to cobble together enough resources to fully cover the uninsured.”

The state’s current program, which has added 5,000 people to Medicaid and enrolled 13,800 people in DirigoChoice, has made progress. Even though the enrollment goal has not been met, the insurance plan has grown faster than any in Maine’s history, the governor said. And although about 60 percent of its enrollees were previously insured, some were paying what state officials deemed was too high a percentage of their income, said Trish Riley, director of the Governor’s Office of Health Policy and Finance.

The DirigoChoice benefits are impressive, said Hilary K. Schneider, policy director for Consumers for Affordable Health Care, a Maine advocacy group. The program completely covers preventive care, subsidizes premiums and deductibles, and unlike most insurance plans, covers treatment for [mental illness](#) and does not exclude people for pre-existing medical conditions.

Such coverage has caused critics to say DirigoChoice would be more affordable if it scaled back benefits.

“It’s a Cadillac policy, and we ought to be trying to fund a Ford Escort policy,” said Jim McGregor, executive vice president of the Maine Merchants Association.

One of DirigoChoice’s success stories, Jacquie Murphy, 63, of Westbrook, said, “It absolutely saved my life.” Ms. Murphy said she has fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, back problems, an autoimmune disease and memory problems from a childhood brain injury. She said that a few years ago, when she left an abusive marriage and gave up her husband’s coverage, the fear of being unable to afford insurance that would accept someone with her illnesses “caused me to become clinically depressed.”

With DirigoChoice, which costs her just over \$100 a month with the state paying a subsidy of about \$250, she now has a walker, sees orthopedic surgeons for shoulder and ankle fractures, and takes medication for memory, [cholesterol](#) and thyroid problems. The relief of being insured lifted her [depression](#), she said, and now, in her home with its Asian-themed pebbled backyard, she works as a career and life coach.

For others, like Leah Deragon, 34, DirigoChoice is too costly. Ms. Deragon, who runs a Portland nonprofit center that helps low-income families with new babies, said that although she and her husband, an engineering student, qualified for a subsidy, they

could not afford the roughly \$300 out-of-pocket cost each month. She remains uninsured, forgoing annual checkups and using [student loan](#) money when she needed dental work.

“For us it was very frustrating,” said Ms. Deragon, who shops at Goodwill and lives in her mother’s home in Gorham to save money. “We earned, I think, \$16,000 last year. We can’t do \$200 or \$300 a month and still put gas in our car. Come the end of the month, we would be forced to hitchhike.”

And there is John Henderson, 42, of Auburn, who enrolled in DirigoChoice in 2006 for about \$90 a month while working at an L. Bean warehouse, a job he kept to 20 hours a week so his income would qualify him for such a low rate.

But he dropped the plan this year when rates increased by 13.4 percent on average. Mr. Henderson, who has [diabetes](#) and is currently jobless, said he had stopped once-regular doctor’s appointments and some medications that “I have just no hope of affording.”

Ms. Schneider’s group is suing the state insurance commissioner for approving the rate increase.

An Anthem spokesman, Mark Ishkanian, said the increase was necessary because medical claims of DirigoChoice customers were “substantially higher” than anticipated, about double those of non-Dirigo plans. One reason for the higher expense was “pent-up demand” by enrollees who had been deferring visits to doctors while they were uninsured, Mr. Ishkanian said. Another was the richness of the coverage, which enrollees used for treating long-held conditions or mental illness, he said.

Ms. Riley said the state was surprised that more than half of DirigoChoice enrollees qualified for the highest subsidy, 80 percent, which meant the program has been more expensive for the state.

She said Maine also expected more small businesses to enroll in DirigoChoice. But many businesses found that the program requirements of enrolling 75 percent of a firm’s employees and paying 60 percent of the cost were too expensive.

“If they weren’t able to afford insurance before, they’re unlikely to be able to afford Dirigo,” said Kristine Ossenfort, senior governmental affairs specialist of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce.

Some health care advocates have accused Anthem of not marketing DirigoChoice enough to prospective customers, which Anthem denies.

Especially controversial was Maine’s financing formula for its program, which assumed that there would be savings because an increase in insured people would mean less charity care from hospitals, and that the cost-cutting measures would mean lower costs to insurers.

The state said it would charge insurers for those savings, rather than let insurers take the savings as profit. But when the state tried to charge insurers \$43.7 million in 2005 and \$34.3 million in 2006, the insurance industry and the chamber of commerce sued, saying the insurers owed much less.

A judge ruled for the state, but the case is being appealed. The governor’s new proposal would phase out this financing structure and impose lower-cost surcharges instead.

Among the state program's biggest fans is Joan M. Donahue, 40, who was uninsured when she started a home care agency in Warren three years ago. She now has DirigoChoice for herself and her 17-year-old son, and three employees are enrolled. She also has two employees who cannot afford it and have not enrolled.

"I will absolutely stick with Dirigo," said Ms. Donahue, who does not qualify for the subsidy. "This program needs healthy people who don't get subsidized so it can prosper."

The Dirigo program has already made one change that could attract people like Malvina Gregory, 31, a Spanish interpreter in Portland, who could not afford the subsidized insurance but may reconsider. Ms. Gregory was originally put off because it demanded full payment up front, and rebated the subsidy later; she went instead to a Portland program giving nearly free care, but is now afraid her income "will bump me over the limit" for that program.

DirigoChoice will now allow individuals to pay only their part up front. "The concept of Dirigo, I think, is phenomenal," Ms. Gregory said. "I hope they are able to lower the premiums. There are a lot of folks like me that are in that bind."

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Speaking out about sexual abuse



CAPTION: Garrett Neese/Daily Mining Gazette

Ink Blot Project artist Misha Sebesta speaks Saturday at the Copper Country Mall.

By GARRETT NEESE, DMG Writer

HOUGHTON — Sexual assault is a horrible and all-too-common occurrence. But it doesn't have to control the rest of your life, survivors and activists say.

Ways of coming to terms with the experience were on display this weekend at the Copper Country Mall as part of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The Chicago-based Ink Blot Project was on display from Friday through Sunday, while assault survivor Kelly Watt talked about her experiences Saturday afternoon.

Chicago artist Misha Sebesta began the Inkblot Project several years ago as a way to tell survivors' tales. Sebesta gathers their accounts on her Web site. She then takes the most representative parts of the stories on canvas and tops them with a pattern of reds and blues, tailoring each one to the person's personality.

"It's a one-shot deal ... so every one is unique, and hopefully as beautiful as the person in it," she said.

Sebesta modeled the project on the AIDS Quilt, which she said helped put a human face on the disease.

"Rather than getting angry and yelling back, the community pulled together, and in a very loving way, said 'Let us share this with you,'" she said.

This marks Sebesta's first out-of-state show. In addition to older pieces, it included eight done for Copper Country survivors.

"It keeps growing, and expanding, and it's really exciting to see," she said.

Sebesta is in talks to bring the Inkblot Project back next year at Michigan Tech University.

Sebesta's newest works included the story of Ontonagon resident Kelly Watt. Saturday, Watt was there to tell it herself.

Beginning at an early age, she was abused by her father, she said.

Her family was often poor, and would hitchhike across the country, begging for food and clothes. When they did get a hotel room, her father made her sleep between beds, "so he could hang his hand down all night to do whatever he wanted to do."

At the age of 14, Watt went to authorities about her father's abuse. She moved to a foster home, where her room was bigger than the apartment her family was crammed into. Feeling guilty, she acceded to her father's request to recant her testimony.

When she was 15, she ran away permanently. The next few years were a blur of drugs and sex, she said.

But she cleaned up once her oldest daughter was born. Now, living happily with her family in Ontonagon, she's written a book about her life called "The 14th Year."

The goal, she said, is not to celebrate the victims of sexual abuse, but the victory they can achieve over what has happened to them.

"Every one of you has the potential to be what you want to be," she said.

Kimberly Salisbury of L'Anse was among the teenagers to attend the speech and display, which she called "very moving and informative."

"It's a really good idea," she said. "It seems to be helping a lot of people. A lot of people need it, especially nowadays."

Permanent wounds — Alliance Against Violence and Abuse helps women recover from abuse



As a sexual assault victim shares her story with the other members of a support group sponsored by the Alliance Against Violence and Abuse, she hugs a Care-A-Lot bear. The bear is the same as bears given to the alliance by local law enforcement agencies to give to children who experience trauma in their lives. (Daily Press photo by Dorothy McNight)

Editor's note: To maintain their confidentiality, the names of the women in the following story who attend the Sexual Assault Survivors Support Group sponsored by the Alliance Against Violence and Abuse have been changed.

By Dorothy McNight — dmcknight@dailypress.net

ESCANABA — "If I'm supposed to be getting better, how come I'm thinking about suicide?"

Almost in tears, Kay, a sexual assault survivor, shared her confusion with Jackie VanEnkevort, crime victim therapist for the Alliance Against Violence and Abuse, at a recent support group meeting.

It took VanEnkevort a number of minutes to reflect on the question before responding, "I know it sounds simplistic, but suicide is a permanent solution for a temporary problem."

But even as Kay spoke, the three other members in the group nodded their heads in affirmation. They, too, had entertained thoughts of suicide at one time or other on their road to wholeness. Kim, who was sexually molested at the age of 11, had even attempted suicide shortly after her attack.

Of the four women, three said they were molested over a period of time. Two were assaulted by relatives and one by both a stranger and a relative.

"I'm not really sure when it first started," said Sally. "But it lasted over a period of years."

"I was 11 when it happened the first time by a close relative and it lasted over a period of time," said Kay. "The verbal abuse is still happening to this day. It's very common for him to call me demeaning names."

Although Kim was molested only once, because of her young age and the violence of the attack, her recovery appears to be the most traumatic of the four victims.

"I was raped by a stranger," she said. "When I told my mother, she told me to take a bath but not to

use soap and then took me to the hospital.”

But Kim's nightmare was only beginning. Shortly after the rape, she attempted suicide and was taken to the state mental hospital in Newberry Regional Mental Health Center where she underwent treatment.

“My mom didn't know what to do with me,” she said. “I really don't think anyone did.”

“Unfortunately, the treatment after a rape becomes part of the rape,” said VanEnkevort. “So many women and girls believe that people are thinking they were asking for it. And with children, they somehow feel they are responsible for what happened to them. They feel as if they are guilty instead of the one who assaulted them.”

Jan had a baby from one of her numerous sexual assaults. Pregnant at the age of 16, she opted to keep her child. The boy, now grown, has long known the circumstances of his birth and is still coping with his own feelings of anger and bewilderment.

Although the women are many years separated from their traumatic experiences, they are still suffering from the effects.

VanEnkevort said many rape victims suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, similar to what many military personnel experience after combat. The stress can last for many years and sometimes a lifetime. The severe depression and feelings of inadequacy that Kay is currently experiencing is only heightened by an assortment of nightmares.

“In one dream, I'm laying on the ground and a bunch of girls are kicking me and punching me and throwing rocks at me,” she said. “When I was in high school, I was pretty much a loner and never had a real friend. I was what most people referred to as ‘a loser.’”

“I'm still afraid to be in a new place,” said Kim. “I'm always afraid that there's a group of men somewhere and they will come out and pounce on me. It seems odd because mine was not a group rape.”

A failed marriage has only enhanced Kim's feelings of insecurity.

Although the other three women are now married, the encouragement they receive from their spouses varies.

“In my case, my husband is very supportive,” said Jan. “He knows all about what happened to me.”

While the support Sally receives from her spouse is limited, she accepts the responsibility for it. “He's supportive as much as he can be, but I don't open up to him as much as I could. Sometimes I think it's fear that keeps me from sharing with him — fear that he might love me less. It's hard for him when he doesn't know what's going on with me.

Secretiveness, even with subsequent spouses, is not uncommon with sexual abuse survivors, said VanEnkevort. “Husband's don't know because there's a lot of secrets. It's hard when a woman is raised in an unhealthy situation or is not able to get protected, so it's hard to believe that others will respond differently. There are lots of people who have secrets who can't talk to anyone.”

Some of women said they were referred to the support group after seeking individual counseling at Pathways. When asked why they attend the group, Kay, who has been with the group for almost a year responded, “Because it's a real safe, loving place to be. This support group and the women here are just amazing. It blew my mind away the first couple of times when I realized how loving, caring and supportive these women are.”

Jan also expressed appreciation for the support she has received at the group meetings. “They've helped me when I was down and at my lowest. I don't know where I'd be if I didn't come here. A couple of times I've thought about quitting, but I would really miss my friends here.”

"They've helped me get over things I never thought I'd get through," said Sally. "It's good to be able to talk with someone who's been through it. They know what I'm talking about. I've come a long way since I started, but I have a long way to go."

As each of the women shared their thoughts, two of them were fiddling with Silly Putty and one hugged a teddy bear.

The reason for the Silly Putty, VanEnkevort explained, is to help the women keep focus. "It gives them something to focus on during the meeting," she said.

The Care-A-Lot bear is the same ones given to local law enforcement agencies to give to youngsters who experience some sort of trauma in their lives, said VanEnkevort. The bears were offered to the Alliance for distribution to the youngsters who are caught up in abusive relationships.

"I felt it was appropriate to give them to these women," VanEnkevort said. "The wounds they suffered in childhood are permanent. They were robbed of their childhood. The bear helps them to focus on their inner child — the child they never got a chance to be."

Victim thankful for abuser's guilty verdict

By MARCIA STEFFENS / Dowagiac Daily News
Monday, April 30, 2007 9:58 AM EDT

CASSOPOLIS - Her words were short but spoke volumes.

The 10-year-old victim of criminal sexual assault which, took place when she was a 3-year-old, told Cass County Circuit Court Judge Michael E. Dodge she was glad her abuser would be in prison, so she wouldn't "have any more bad dreams."

Joshua Williams, 24, of 185 W. Second St., Constantine, was babysitting for his cousin on Jan. 20, 2000, on U.S. 12.

When relatives came home, the child was found with blackened eyes, bruises, cigarette burns on her buttocks and evidence of sexual penetration.

On March 22 of this year, a jury convicted Williams of two counts of first-degree CSC.

Chief Assistant Prosecutor Jason Ronning told the court Friday morning there was "a mountain of evidence" against Williams.

"Some of the most terrible photographs I have ever seen," he added.

Ronning asked the court to consider going above the sentence guidelines of 135 to 225 months. "It is the worst assault I have ever seen that doesn't end in death," Ronning said.

Williams did not speak, but his attorney Victor Bland commented Williams has the support of his family and a good relationship with his own child.

Bland asked the judge if he read the letters from Williams and others.

Bland asked for a sentence at the low end, adding Williams had never been in jail before and has been a productive member of society for the past seven years.

Dodge sentenced Williams to two concurrent sentences of 14 to 30 years, with credit for 189 days served. He is to pay \$750 in court costs, a \$60 crime victim fee and \$60 state costs.

More education spending could help challenge younger children

By Hannah Northey

Capital News Service

LANSING — Lawmakers and child development experts are worried that many children in Oakland County are not receiving an adequate education at a young age.

Many low-income families aren't able to afford preschool and many day care centers aren't providing ideal environments for the learning and developmental stimulation children need, said Mark Sullivan, executive director of MI4C, a state organization that promotes child care.

Research shows that children's brains develop the most between 3 to 5 years of age. Without intellectual stimulation, children have a more difficult time developing socially, physically and emotionally.

"The 609 child care centers in Oakland County are only required to have licenses that ensure kids are healthy and safe," Sullivan said. "That's a long way from what we could call the threshold of quality —it's not meeting their needs."

Children often attend low-quality day care programs or are watched by untrained friends or family members, said Joan Firestone, director of early childhood services at Oakland Schools.

Those custodial options may not provide the best setting for learning, she said.

Sullivan said that only 6 percent of the state's 4,800 child care centers are nationally accredited, a "gold standard" showing their facilities meet outside review.

"Many parents think their children are getting a good education in day care, and they aren't," she said. "Only three out of every 10 children nationwide are getting a program that meets their developmental needs."

Brian Whiston, who lobbies for Oakland County school districts, said that in the county's 28 districts, many children don't go to preschool because of money or transportation issues.

Last year, 5,325 children under 12 in Oakland County received subsidized child care. According to the Michigan League for Human Services, that number represented only 10 percent of the children who are eligible for Medicaid.

Firestone said many families can't afford transportation to get children to places where governmental assistance is offered. Such programs include federally funded Head Start and state-funded ones such as Michigan School Readiness.

Firestone said there are waiting lists for both programs, and Head Start serves only half of the eligible children.

Full-day child care can cost from \$4,000 to \$10,000 a year, according to the Children's Defense Fund, a nonprofit organization focused on child welfare based in Washington, D.C.

Only one out of seven children eligible for child care assistance under federal law receives help nationally, according to the group.

Firestone said research shows that for every dollar spent at the preschool level, there is a \$7 return. "They're more likely to go to secondary school, to have jobs and contribute to society—and less likely to get arrested," she said.

Some Michigan lawmakers have proposed changing the education system to make preschool programs more affordable and to mandate kindergarten for 5 year olds.

Rep. Hoon-Yung Hopgood, D-Taylor, of the House Education Committee, said lawmakers don't know how much the initiative would cost the state. It depends on how the plan is implemented and how many more teachers will be required, he said.

But he said the cost would eventually be paid off in the contributions productive students make to society.

"If we really want to reform education, this is where we can make the most impact," he said. "Students will need less special education programs and other services."

PRESS & GUIDE

County group to boost child services

By Sean Delaney
, Press & Guide Newspapers

DEARBORN HEIGHTS

Almost 85 percent of a child's intellectual development takes place between birth and age 5, but nearly one in four children in Wayne County are born to mothers who lack a high school education, according to recent data gathered by the Great Start Collaborative-Wayne (GSC-W).

The GSC-W, an organization created in 2005 by Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm dedicated to the well being of Wayne County's children and their families, presented the data Monday morning at the Henry Ford Centennial Library in Dearborn.

"We want to make sure that all the children of Wayne County are healthy, happy and ready to succeed," said Virginia Burns Saleem, manager of Detroit Head Start, who also represented the office of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick at the forum on Monday.

According to the data, the number of births in Wayne County has decreased by nearly 33 percent in the last 15 years, and three out of every 10 children born lives in poverty.

"The children of Wayne County are not doing well," said Colin Newlin, president of Braintree Consulting Solutions. "There is a great deal of work that needs to be done. We need to do more than just talk — we need to do."

Wayne County has lost nearly 89,000 residents since 2000, according to Kurt Metzger, director of research for the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, due primarily to job loss and other economic factors affecting the state.

Median household income also declined between 1999 and 2005 — from \$47,800 to \$40,881 when adjusted for inflation, which has resulted in an increase of almost 50,000 Wayne County residents whose income fell below federal poverty guidelines. During that same time, the poverty rate for children under age five increased by nearly 6 percent in all areas.

"As a member of the Michigan House of Representatives, I know that there are challenges we must overcome," said Rep. Hoon-Yung Hopgood (D-Taylor), who also serves on the GSC-W committee. "First and foremost, we must make sure that we are able to provide essential services and support for the youngest among us."

According to the data, approximately 29 out of every 100 babies are born to mothers who have not received adequate prenatal care. Nearly one in 10 babies are born with a dangerously low birth weight, and 11 out of 1,000 infants die before their first birthday.

"We see so many tragic stories each and every day," said Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, who also represented the office of Gov. Granholm at the forum. "We must fight against the trend to cut preventative programs."

While childhood education begins at home, nearly 6 percent of children under age five spend part of the day outside the care of their parents — a fact that makes providing essential services and support that much more important, according to Edith Killins, director of Wayne County Health and Human Services.

"Children are our best resource," said Killins, who also served as a representative for the office of Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano at Monday's meeting. "It's because of the services and support provided by organizations like (Great Start) that we see the success we do as parents."

Thanks to programs like Great Start, the number of substantiated cases of child abuse and

neglect for children under age 5 has been significantly reduced over the last five years. Also, the number of children found to have lead poisoning has decreased to about 5.2 percent due to an overall increase in the amount of children being tested.

"Regardless of how the numbers are sliced and diced, we're talking about real children," said Veronica Rosa, a parent and member of the GSC-W.

"If this system doesn't work for them, it doesn't work. We must start making our children an important part of our lives and our decisions — they deserve nothing less."

To learn more about the Great Start-Collaborative-Wayne, including the full results of the study, visit www.greatstartcollaborativewayne.org.

Contact Staff Writer Sean Delaney at (313) 359-7820 or sdelaney@heritage.com.

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Published April 29, 2007

Pantry marks 25 years of 'Helping Hands'

By RACHEL S. GRECO
Editor

CHARLOTTE — When Pam Huffman goes before local church or service groups to expound on the benefits of Helping Hands, she takes along a small package of twin Saltine crackers.

Holding up the wrapper that many people receive with a bowl of soup at their local diner, she tries to bring the reality facing many Eaton County children into focus for the crowd.



(Photo by Rachel S. Greco | Lansing Community News)
Robert Gusey and Mildred Steward fill a food order at Helping Hands. The food pantry is celebrating 25 years in the community.

"We know that every child is supposed to get three square meals a day," Huffman tells them. "If it were not for this food pantry, this would probably represent two square meals for some of them."

Last year, Helping Hands, Charlotte's local food bank located off Cochran Avenue, provided food for over 9,000 people. It was a record year for the non-profit — representing an increase of over 3,000 clients from 2005.

Huffman said it always surprises people to hear just how many of their neighbors and fellow residents can't afford to go grocery shopping. Yet she says the need is great and will likely increase over the coming years. "We are probably one business that will never go out of business for lack of business."

And just how does the operation's program director feel about that, keeping in mind that this year Helping Hands is celebrating its 25th year in the community?

"I guess that is disturbing, disappointing, to realize there will always be a need for food pantries," she admitted.

But volunteers with Helping Hands say, on the up-side, the good that is done at this local pantry lifts spirits and spreads hope to many struggling families.

Robert Gusey is one of seven full-time volunteers who helps fill food orders at the pantry. Huffman's is the only paid position there. "One of my neighbors brought me down here and I started volunteering the next day," he said. "I didn't realize there were really food banks around."

That was three years ago. Today, Gusey said he still feels good when residents show their

gratitude for the assistance they receive there. "I like to watch them," he said. "They appreciate it so much and it makes you feel good to make you know you can help them."

Since its start in 1982, Huffman said Helping Hands has been at three different locations in the Charlotte community. The pantry officially serves the needs of residents within the Charlotte Public Schools district and of Vermontville, but volunteers never turn anyone away. They often fill orders for just a few days worth of food and then redirect people to a food bank in their own community.

It is all done on a very tight budget. Huffman said the pantry's operational budget of between \$20,000 and \$22,000 annually pays for the upkeep of the building — electricity, repairs and supplies. Funding for the food there comes directly from the Greater Lansing Food Bank. Shopping for canned goods, fresh fruit, meat and toiletry items is usually done at the American Red Cross Food Distribution Center in Lansing.

Huffman said beyond that, grants and community donations are a huge reason the pantry is able to offer what it can. "What we've always considered is that we're a safety net," she explained. "We're the people that collect these people at the bottom and get them what they need."

Despite misconceptions, Huffman said the majority of people who rely on the food bank for help are not on welfare. Many, she said, work two or three minimum wage jobs in an effort to make ends meet. In fact, 75 percent of Helping Hands clients only visit the pantry two or three times a year.

"I think that people feel that if people come to a food pantry most are on welfare, that they must not be working," she said. "The people that come here are trying very hard."

Mildred Steward is a volunteer and a member of Helping Hands eight-member Board of Directors. She also heads up the annual Eaton Craft Project, which is administrated from the Helping Hands building. Through it, volunteers knit hats and mittens for children and families that don't have them for the winter.

Steward said the operation fills a void in many people's lives. "If you've got cold hands and a cold tummy without food, you're not going to be very comfortable."

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Church expands offerings

Saturday, April 28, 2007

JOE SNAPPER

THE SAGINAW NEWS

When it comes to feeding the hungry, the Old Town Christian Outreach Center is striving to make sure its reach does not exceed its grasp.

The nondenominational Saginaw church at 600 Gratiot is expanding its 9,500-square-foot chapel and office with a 4,800-square-foot dining area and kitchen, said the Rev. Donald H. Dinninger.

The new facility accommodates up to 160 people at once, or 340 in two lunchtime shifts. It replaces a roving soup kitchen that has served tens of thousands of meals out of a

tractor-trailer truck during the past seven years, he said.

"Now, we're going to be able to give them a place where they can come inside" and serve "more nutritious meals," said Dinninger, also the Saginaw Police Department chaplain.

Construction may cost between \$250,000 and \$500,00 and wrap up by summer's end, said Bob Bishop, project manager for Cornerstone Fabricating of Hemlock.

Planning Commission members approved the site plan unanimously last week.

In their recommendation for approval, city staffers said the ministry has, during the past decade, bought up the entire northwest block at Lyon and South Michigan and cemented itself as a community "asset."

The kitchen will offer meals from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. seven days a week. The ministry prohibits loitering and sleeping at the property. The congregation of 400 will worship Sundays, city staffers said.

"The businessowners in the area have nothing but praise for what you've done for the neighborhood," Planning Commissioner and City Councilman Larry Coulouris told Dinninger.

Dinninger and his wife, Bonnie, transformed a hardware store into a church in 1996. Its ministry also arranges to provide free clothes, groceries and health services to the needy. v

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Navy veteran's funeral costly

Saturday, April 28, 2007

By Kristin Longley

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A proud Navy veteran. A dedicated family man. A talented landscaper.

The family of Ronald Kenneth Jeremy -- who many knew as "Ronnie," the guy who was always quick with a joke or a grin -- wants to give him the funeral they say he deserves. They want the military's traditional 21-gun salute and flag-draped casket, said oldest daughter Michelle Crabtree.

But they came up against an all-too-common problem in Michigan's declining economy -- the family doesn't have the \$6,500 to pay for his funeral. Jeremy retired more than 15 years ago from a job with a landscaping company and didn't have insurance.

He also had his left leg amputated because of a heart condition and used a wheelchair or walker. The Jackson resident died Tuesday in his sleep at age 68.

Jeremy left behind a wife and four daughters. Two live off Social Security payments, and one is unemployed. Crabtree and her husband, Larry, work at the Felpausch on W. Michigan Avenue and are working to secure a loan -- with no luck so far.

When Jackson's poor die, the state, funeral homes and cemeteries work to cover the cost of their final preparations. The governor and lawmakers just slashed the state's contribution by about one-third.

Now, the state pays up to \$680 for indigent burials, Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said.

The cut leaves funeral homes with little choice but to provide a simple coffin and graveside service.

Patience-Montgomery Funeral Home, 406 First St., which is handling Jeremy's funeral, is one of several local funeral homes that have cut back on services for indigents because of the cuts.

"We believe that everyone deserves a dignified funeral, and that's why we're trying to help them out as much as possible," manager Tim Hartley said. "We try to do the best we can, but there aren't many choices. Some things need to be paid for."

In come indigent cases, families still have to pay for burial and the cost of a vault, which can add up to more than \$2,500.

"He was such a good man, a kind man, a great family man," Crabtree said. "He deserves more than that. We wanted to give him more."

So, the family opted against an indigent burial and picked out a nice coffin, arranged for visitation and contacted the Navy. The military will cover the cost of the plot and burial, but the family is still scrambling to cover the embalming, the casket and services.

They've come up with \$425, a small fraction of the \$6,500 they need.

"We're not a very wealthy family. We never were," Crabtree said. "We live paycheck to paycheck and we're

all trying to pull together, but we're coming up short."

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Lawsuit says Kelly's order harms Black children, others

By Diane Bukowski

The Michigan Citizen

DETROIT — Wayne County Circuit Court Chief Judge Mary Beth Kelly has irreparably harmed thousands of abused, neglected or delinquent children by removing their long-time, mostly Black attorneys, and replacing them with groups dominated by white and frequently inexperienced attorneys, according to a lawsuit filed April 10.

Seventeen-year-old Tony B. and his attorney Deborah Trent are among dozens of plaintiffs named in the lawsuit. It was filed by the Trial Lawyers Association of Wayne County Circuit Court, on behalf of over 20,000 children in protective services and delinquency proceedings.

"I'm very concerned about the fact that the number of Black attorneys available to represent a population of 80 percent Black children has been reduced from 85 percent to 25 percent, with a resulting lack of cultural sensitivity and communication," said Trent. "It's as if the parent, child and attorney are speaking different languages."

Trent recently co-founded Black Attorneys United for Justice. She has represented over 1,000 children as a Lawyer Guardian Ad Litem (LGAL) since 1985. She spoke during a press conference held on the steps of the Lincoln Hall for Juvenile Justice.

The suit says Trent has had a close relationship with Tony and his younger brothers Antoine, 15, and Carleton, 14 for seven years, representing them in child protective proceedings.

But after Kelly removed her last November under Administrative Order 2006-08, Tony has experienced ongoing crises, including a 45-day suspension from school which has jeopardized his foster placement. It says Trent's efforts to place Antoine and Carleton in foster homes have also been sabotaged.

It says that Tony continues to rely on Trent as his primary source of support, along with his current foster mother, and that Trent continues to represent him as best as she can because he has not yet been notified of a current representative.

The suit asks for the Michigan State Supreme Court to assume superintending control, repeal Kelly's administrative order, reinstate the previous attorneys, and prevent any further removals of attorneys.

"Chief Judge Kelly has unilaterally and in violation of the law removed hundreds of lawyers who have represented thousands of children for years and severed the lawyer-client relationship without legal justification," said attorney Julie Hurwitz, who represents the plaintiffs.

"She has ordered the lawyers to turn confidential files over to over to generic counsel. This ruling has created a crisis, especially for those at the bottom of the economic rung, who have already been victimized and traumatized. It violates the clients' constitutional rights to be appointed effective legal protection and advocacy."

The lawsuit's claims are disputed by Kelly as well as the Legal Aid and Defender Association, one of the groups assigned to handle the children's cases.

Kelly said, "Because this matter is pending in the state Supreme Court, I am somewhat limited in what I can comment on. Changes were made to the assignment of counsel system in an effort to improve the representation of young people. The changes were consistent with the law, and the court will be filing a response to the complaint April 19."

In previous published statements, Kelly said that the intent of her order was to speed up handling of cases by assigning teams of lawyers to specific courtrooms. She said the contracts, with the Legal Aid and Defender Association (LADA), the Southgate-based Michigan Children's Law Center, and three more groups, would cost about \$4.7 million for the current fiscal year.

But the Trial Lawyers Association lawsuit says that in fact, Kelly's order has left only 35 full-time attorneys available to represent at least 8,000 children in child protective proceedings (228 per attorney) and 11,600 delinquency cases (331 per attorney). The suit says this violates national guidelines which mandate a caseload of

only 100 children per attorney.

It says that the assigned groups, many of them with minimal experience in the juvenile court, receive large fees to refer cases to independent contractors who are paid inadequate flat fixed fees regardless of the number of cases to which they are assigned.

Roger Lennert, Director of Marketing and Development for the Legal Aid and Defender Association, vigorously objected to various allegations in the lawsuit, calling them "potentially libelous," in a prepared statement.

"Legal Aid and Defender is one of Metro Detroit's largest organizations led and governed by African-Americans," said the statement. "Of its 26 board members, 18 are African-American, eight are European-American. Of its five key executives, three are African-American women (one is the CEO) . . . The organization's 180 staff members are divided almost evenly between attorneys and support staff. Seventy-five percent – including attorneys and other professionals – are African-American."

The statement adds, "Legal Aid and Defender provides a tremendous support infrastructure for its attorneys. Each attorney receives ongoing continuing legal education and professional development. He or she works in an environment where some 80 other attorneys are available for consultation on any matter."

The statement also disputes a variety of other allegations in the lawsuit not referenced in this article.

Hurwitz said the Trial Lawyers Association has asked the state Supreme Court to hear arguments on the case by May 1, but expects that date may be delayed.

Hearing set to review Case misconduct decision

By Jil Schult, Gaylord Herald Times Staff Writer Posted Saturday, April 28, 2007 12:16 AM EDT

MONTMORENCY COUNTY — A show of cause hearing is set for July 19 in Detroit for Montmorency County Prosecutor Terrie Conklin Case following a petition for a review of order of the Otsego County Hearing Panel in which professional misconduct charges were dismissed.

The appeal, filed by Darlene Rynkowski, will be heard by the nine-person panel of the Attorney Discipline Board.

“Because I did not testify,” Rynkowski stated in a telephone interview Thursday on why she filed the petition. “Nobody asked me questions.”

The Attorney Discipline Board (ADB), Otsego County Hearing Panel, comprised of Gaylord attorneys James Cotant and Elliot Blumberg and Petoskey attorney Steve Tresidder, dismissed seven of the original nine charges of misconduct. On April 4 the board ordered all charges dismissed.

Case remarked Friday she was not surprised at Rynkowski’s decision to appeal to the full discipline board. “I am certain that the panel’s decision will be upheld.”

In the opinion from the ADB, the hearing panel stated, “Rynkowski’s actions six months after the Aug. 26, 2005 hearing and 30 days after the announcement of Case’s candidacy appears to be the last act in what is otherwise vindictive course of action for challenging her conduct in Montmorency County.”

Rynkowski, in her petition for review, denies the panel’s opinion that her motives were political.

“Although I do not believe she should be a judge or even a prosecutor, I would not actively try to harm her attempts behind her back,” said Rynkowski in her five-page petition.

“I did not know she had announced her candidacy ... I did not grieve her to upset her campaign ... I grieved her because of her deception and lies to Kent County.”

The charges, filed by the Attorney Grievance Commission, focused on a letter Case wrote to a Dept. of Human Services (DHS) supervisor concerning the role of a DHS investigator testifying in the Cumper-Fletcher case, for which Case was prosecuor.

According to James Metz, Attorney Grievance administrator, the show of cause hearing is an appellate review of the hearing panel decision.

“Any party to a hearing has a right to seek an appellate review,” said Metz, who said he was “not pleased” with the ADB’s April 4 decision.

During the appellate review, the panel may sustain, reverse or modify any part of the hearing panel opinion, Metz said.

According to Rynkowski, Case, Metz and Rynkowski will each have up to 15 minutes to speak.

“I have one thing going for me,” said Rynkowski, “the truth.”

In her petition for review, Rynkowski claimed, “The Grievance Commission read all the statements I sent to them and a panel of six lawyers and three non-lawyers authorized a formal complaint in June 2006.

“...The panel heard evidence and witnesses for the defense and yet no evidence was presented to show that my involvement was limited and official and that many lies were presented to the panel.

“I base this information from my reading of the findings since I was not in the hearing ... It must be evident now as to why the defense did not want me to testify. Too much truth could have been revealed to the panel,”she said in her petition for review.

Rynkowski contends she had no involvement with Montmorency County officials

other than 30 minutes when she visited the Cumper Farms to check on the residence where her client had lived. She had not heard from anyone again until two years later when Ben Bolser, attorney for Gerald Cumper, called her to testify about the conditions at Cumper Farms.

According to Metz, the process is a tiered system in the sense that this appeal could ultimately go as far as the Michigan Supreme Court.

“I do not ask for this review so I can clear my name or because I was harmed,” Rynkowski continued in the petition for review. “My real concern is for the integrity of the office of prosecutor and the rights of citizens to receive a fair trial.”

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Candidates see challenges to school quality

Six candidates are competing for two four-year terms on the Onsted board of education.

By [Dennis Pelham](#)

Daily Telegram Staff Writer

ONSTED — A crowded field of six candidates are competing in the May 8 election for two four-year terms on the Onsted Community Schools board of education.

The selection of a new superintendent was completed this month, leaving the board to deal with the major issues of adapting Onsted schools to meet the needs of students in the changing economy while dealing with a statewide school funding crunch.

Timothy Kelly is seeking a second-term on the board while trustee Rick Olson is retiring in June. First-time candidates for the board are Julia Clark, Keith Williams, Alan Schafer, Douglas Miller and Susan Nortley.

Five of the candidates appeared at a forum at Onsted High School on Wednesday to describe their reasons for running for the board and what approach they would take if elected. Nortley did not attend.

TIMOTHY KELLY

Kelly is a 20-year employee of the Michigan Department of Human Services, serving the last six years in an administrative position after starting his career working in programs for delinquent and abused children. He has a son graduating this spring and another who is a high school freshman.

Kelly said he hopes to provide some stability for the district, which has seen 10 school board members leave, several superintendent changes and new principals or assistant principals in each building since he was elected four years ago.

Challenges the schools face include developing more positive involvement by parents, maintaining a quality staff in a competitive market and continuing to develop the schools' technology infrastructure.

Maintaining quality through a period of uncertain state funding requires administrators to continue scrutinizing every expenditure, he said.

"Beyond that, we are going to have to think creatively," Kelly said. A sinking fund millage should be considered to provide local revenue for technology infrastructure that students need to meet new educational demands, he said. Collaboration with other schools to explore ways of working together to reduce costs should be pursued. And Kelly said he is opposed to privatizing some school services to save money. "The best thing we can do is negotiate good contracts with the people who provide those services," he said.

KEITH WILLIAMS

Williams runs his own business, producing education materials he distributes to schools across the United States. His wife has been a teacher for 22 years, currently working in Adrian, and they have daughters in the eighth and fourth grades and one entering kindergarten this fall. He is also active in the Kiwanis Club, serving on boards at the state and local level.

Finance is the largest issue he sees facing the district. "We have an excellent school system here," Williams said, and the quality has to be maintained to continue attracting families to the district and holding on to good teachers and administrators.

Williams said a sinking fund millage can be beneficial in meeting financial challenges. A tax to help with building and infrastructure expenses would preserve general fund money for direct educational expenses, he said, but he believes such a tax increase will be a difficult sell to voters.

Privatizing the schools' food, transportation and janitorial services are possibilities to which Williams said he is keeping an open mind. "I would hate to forgo a good employee to save a dollar," he said, however. Substitute teachers and the driver education program at Onsted have already been privatized, he added.

JULIA CLARK

Clark said she is running for the school board because of a passion for education and for helping families. She graduated from Onsted High School, she said, and took elementary education courses in college before working as a florist and in real estate management, and has run a daycare center in Onsted the past 11 years. Clark helped start a middle school PTSO, was a parent representative in reviewing reproductive health courses and took part in the search for a new assistant high school principal and a new superintendent in the past year. She has children in the 11th and ninth grades.

Onsted schools have to continue investing in technology, Clark said, to prepare students for the technical careers that will be available. A local sinking fund is one way to help meet the challenge of providing a quality school with less money, she said.

"I'm passionate about that when students leave here they will be prepared for where they are going in life," she said.

Clark said she believes a sinking fund could draw overwhelming support if voters understand it would maintain the quality of Onsted schools and continue the community's history of investing in its schools.

Privatization is not an answer, Clark said.

"Personally, I'm against it. Our school district is the number one employer in our community," she said. Displacing people from their jobs to hire private contractors to take over school functions will not be a benefit, she said.

ALAN SCHAFER

Schafer said Onsted has become his home since moving here 12 years ago from Tecumseh, where he grew up. His twin daughters are high school freshmen this year. Clark said he has 30 years' experience running his own business that has grown to include facilities in Tampa, Fla., and Huntsville, Ala.

"My motivation is to help. I'm tired of hearing people complain to me," Schafer said. His main interest, he said, is in long-range planning, and said he would like to contact schools across the country and look into innovations being made. Major changes are coming in the next 10 years in how schools will operate and educate children, he said.

"The biggest problem is going to be getting everyone to get their arms around change," Schafer said. The board will have to very transparent to maintain public support during the process, he said.

"The schools are not babysitters. We've got to get that through to the parents," he said. Schools also cannot be the

suppliers of morals and ethics, he added. The attitude that the school is responsible for raising children has to be turned around, he said.

One of the changes Schafer said he believes is necessary will be to privatize transportation and building maintenance and focus school officials on education. "I guarantee you we're going there," Schafer said.

Schafer said he is not familiar with the sinking fund millage option but is willing to consider it.

School safety is a major issue as well as finances for the district, he added.

"If we don't keep our kids safe we don't have to worry about the rest of the stuff," he said.

DOUGLAS MILLER

Miller is also a 12-year resident of the Onsted school district. The Columbia Center High School graduate has a bachelor's degree in education and is working toward a master's degree at Eastern Michigan University, he said. He has children in the eighth, 10th and 12th grades. Miller said he has volunteered for school activities involving his children and is running for the board because he wants to be more involved in the schools and community.

Miller said he has been impressed with the quality of teachers and administrators he has dealt with during the 12 years his children have been in the schools here.

Safety in the schools is the top issue facing the district, he said. "Sometimes we get complacent and think nothing like that can happen here," Miller said. "Anything we can do that is fiscally possible I think we should do to make school safer."

Miller said he would like to see the district do more with student fundraising activities to help with funding problems. A sinking fund is a possibility, he said, but a tax increase would have to be handled cautiously.

"The first thing that entered my mind is that this is a fancy name for raising taxes," Miller said. The school district would have to present the issue carefully to be certain people understand what a sinking fund would do, he said.

Miller said he is not warm to the idea of privatizing school services. That type of move is called outsourcing in the automotive industry and is not a positive issue with workers, he said. If the purpose of privatization is to eliminate jobs, he said, the board would have to examine it carefully, he said.

-- CLOSE WINDOW--



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Colleen Steinman or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Welfare reform program will put people back to work and help Washtenaw County families achieve self-sufficiency

April 30, 2007

YPSILANTI – Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) Director Marianne Udow and Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth Director Keith W. Cooley today showcased the expanded Jobs, Education and Training (JET) welfare reform program that will help Washtenaw County families secure long-term employment and become self-sufficient.

Beginning in September 2004, a broad-based welfare reform work group developed a new approach to creating permanent work force status for DHS clients. JET grew out of this work group and pilot programs in Kent, Oakland, Sanilac and Wayne counties were included in the fiscal year 2006 DHS budget. A net savings of \$16 million is forecast for fiscal year 2007. The program will cost approximately \$40 million to implement, but is expected to result in \$56 million in grant savings.

Preliminary results in the four pilot locations showed that caseloads held steady or slightly declined. In areas that did not offer JET, there was a 5 percent increase. In 2006, JET sites experienced a 3 percent increase in FIP caseload compared to an 11 percent increase in the remainder of the state.

JET expanded to serve 19 counties into 2007 and will help Michigan meet new federal work participation requirements. The program is a cooperative venture between the departments of Human Services and Labor and Economic Growth, Michigan Works! Agencies and Michigan Rehabilitation Services.

"JET fundamentally changes the way we move families off welfare and toward self-sufficiency," Udow said. "The program supports them in developing job skills and moving permanently to self-sufficiency."

JET is a win-win-win for Michigan. For welfare recipients, it's an opportunity to qualify for - and keep - good paying jobs. For Michigan's businesses, JET is supporting the workforce and skill needs they have today and for the future. For the state, it means more Michigan residents gaining their independence in good jobs and leaving the welfare roles and contributing to the tax base again.

"The JET initiative is just one example of Governor Jennifer Granholm's efforts to promote economic development and increase jobs to transform Michigan's economy," Cooley said. "Her economic plan has been set in motion and it's beginning to work to attract new businesses and diversify our economy. The governor is continually improving our business climate to make our state more attractive to businesses so they'll locate and expand and create jobs here."

The JET program:

- Uses a thorough up-front assessment and Family Self-Sufficiency Plan to tailor supports and services to the individual circumstances of recipient and family.

-MORE-

- Expands educational and training opportunities so clients gain the skills they need to get a good paying job in high-demand fields.
- Focuses career and technical training opportunities on jobs the Michigan economy has available (e.g., health care, construction).
- Provides supportive services when clients face serious barriers to work, with the goal of reducing and removing those barriers so clients can participate in work or work preparation.
- Provides advocacy and support for those who are making application for Supplemental Security Income.
- Extends post-employment support from 90 days to 180 days to help clients retain jobs and prepare a plan for advancement.

“The welfare reform plan will meet federal work participation requirements within the federal time frame, protect the safety net and help people become permanently attached to the labor force so they can move their families out of poverty,” Udow said. “Self-sufficiency is better for families, and what is better for families is better for children.”

For more information about JET go to www.michigan.gov/jet

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